

We think of heroes as larger than life performers of daring deeds. Yet it is actually their real life sized humanity, the courage to pursue their convictions despite their admitted vulnerability, that renders them extraordinary.

Just such a hero was Laguna Beach resident and former U.S. Navy Seal Mark Metherell, who died in Iraq on April 11, 2008. A plaque in his honor was dedicated this past Veteran's Day in a park in Emerald Bay, where he grew up.

The inscription is testimony to Metherell's humanity: "In Honor and Memory of Mark Metherell; Killed in Action; Baghdad, Iraq, April 11, 2008; Emerald Bay Swim Team, US Navy Seal Team V; Wonderful Son, Loving Husband, Adoring Father, Loyal Patriot, Good and Faithful Servant."

A crowd of about 80 people, young and old, gathered solemnly at Emerald Green Park, near the bay's broad beach. Dave Kuhn, who helped Metherell's mother and father, Pam and Alex Metherell, organize the event, made introductions before ceding the podium to our district's congressional representative, John Campbell, a Republican from Newport Beach.

Campbell was there to honor Metherell and all veterans, but also to present a local WWII veteran, Otis Cranford of Newport Beach, with two long overdue medals. An army lieutenant, Cranford was serving as a navigator in a B-24-H when his plane was shot down over Holland. He suffered extensive injuries and was held prisoner in a German POW camp for a year and half until May 1, 1945.

Though he was cited for the POW Medal and the Purple Heart, Cranford never received the actual medals. Campbell's office helped Cranford's family get them issued 65 years later. Cranford's grandsons received the honor of pinning them on him. "It feels good," said a misty-eyed Cranford after the ceremony, remembering the 10 other soldiers on board, seven of whom perished in the crash. "You never forget the men who died with you," he said.

Succeeding him in the limelight was U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander (Ret.) Tony Duchi, who recalled fond memories of his friend and fellow Seal Mark Metherell.

On the spot overlooking the beach that served as his son's boyhood backyard, father Alex Metherell spoke eloquently of his son's service and dedication during his final mission in Iraq. As a large group of Iraqi forces headed into Sadr City, Metherell was the only American in the lead vehicle, accompanying six Iraqi special forces officers that he was helping to train, when it drove over an IED (improvised explosive device) that exploded and threw the vehicle 200 feet. Only the driver survived.

A sequence of events followed that helped make sense of the tragedy, Alex Metherell explained. The following week at an unrelated White House ceremony, a friend of his son and a fellow Seal encountered a senior Naval officer, who quizzed him about what happened to Metherell. The officer told the friend with some urgency about the need to "clean up" Sadr City. Soon, a team of Navy Seals did just that. In a matter of weeks following Metherell's death, said his father, relative peace was restored to Sadr City, and the citizens were able to return to their normal lives. "All of that is a result of Mark's death," he said. "Certainly some very good things came out of it."

His mother, Pam, found another reason for solace. "Mark was a very strong Christian and we know exactly where he is," she said. "And knowing where he is makes heaven more inviting."

For all of Metherell's accomplishments in the line of duty, it was clear when the flag that had been draped over the memorial plaque ascended the flagpole and the audience stood to sing the national anthem, that the tears and wavering voices were a testament as much to the local hero who had touched their hearts as to the brave soldier.

(The flag was subsequently lowered to half-mast in remembrance of the recent lives lost at Fort Hood.)

"I feel really blessed that so many people continue to love and remember Mark," said Metherell's widow Sarah, who was accompanied by their daughter Cora. She said a local memorial is particularly comforting since her husband's body is at Ft. Rosencrans National Cemetery near San Diego.

Now she and Cora have a second memorial to visit. The recently completed mosaic on the Brooks Street Beach stairs, below their neighborhood, incorporates tiles bearing Metherell's name and the Navy Seal team trident into the fourth step.